

Are Israelis the New Crusaders?

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The victories of Hamas and Kadima in the Palestinian and Israeli elections, respectively, brought into sharp focus the key question in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — the future of the territories occupied since 1967.

Kadima, under Ehud Olmert, placed “realignment” — withdrawal from most of the West Bank — at the top of its agenda. The principal consideration behind “realignment,” which was supported by the left, the center, and some of the political right, was fear that the Palestinian residents of the occupied territories had demographically “conquered” the State of Israel.

Due mainly to disappointment with the ruling Fateh party, a religiously orientated movement was voted into power in the Palestinian elections. Hamas views the Zionist entity as foreign to the Muslim region and lacking legitimacy in the Middle East.

Following this summer’s war in Lebanon, the “realignment” has apparently retreated into deep freeze, and the sides are becoming entrenched in their old positions.

The legitimacy of Israel is again being questioned — and the Crusader metaphor is again being trotted out — especially by Hamas and Hizbullah.

Arab scholars, writers and politicians have nurtured the Crusader myth of Zionism and Israelism in order to prove that Israel is a Western-colonialist entity in the Eastern Arab area. The Zionist-Crusader analogy sought to create a parallel between the Crusader colonialism of the Middle Ages and “Zionist colonialism” of the Anglo-French variety.

The Arab anti-colonialism was represented as a war of Muslims against Crusaders. The expellers of the Crusaders were regarded as Islamic heroes. Barbaric Crusaders and chivalrous Muslims were posed as moral opposites, and the mythological construction of a Zionist-Crusader invasion was created,

an ideological construction for contemporary purposes.¹

Zionism was depicted as a religious movement nationally oppressive of the local population and economically exploitative towards them. This alien regime was said to have no culture of its own and to lack all national authenticity; thus, the soldier-pioneer of the degenerate Western civilization would collapse as soon as he was up against a united front.

Although the Crusader-Zionist analogy has not been central to the Israeli discourse, the many treatments the subject has been given show that the historical parallel which Arab circles have made has not been lost on Israeli intellectuals.

The Israeli participants in the “Crusader discourse” engaged in a dialogue which involved the origins, as much as the future, of the Jewish state at the heart of the Arab-Muslim East. How did each side select principles, images and perceptions corresponding to its political viewpoint and general outlook?²

The analogy served as a pretext for posing the question “Who are we?” this time in its contrary form, “Who aren’t we?” The question “Are we Crusaders?” preceded the question “Are we colonialists?” In other words, the Zionist-Crusader analogy reflected a veiled debate in which the colonialist question was broached without being called by its name. Thus, an interpretation of the Zionist enterprise as a colonialist project was hinted at in this way until the advent of the post-Zionists who renewed its open discussion.³

Before the outbreak of the 1967 Six Day War, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser was compared to the legendary leader Saladin, who in the distant past had defeated the foreign invaders.⁴ The weekly journal *El-Howdat* informed its readers that “since Salah ed-Din el-Ayyubi (Saladin), the Arabs have not had a leader like Abdel Nassr.”⁵ Saladin was viewed as a mobilizing symbol of the liberation of Jerusalem, “of Muslim unity, religious sacrifice, selfless struggle, and the victory of faith.”⁶

¹ David Ohana, “The Cross, the Creseent and the Star of David: The Zionist-Crusader Analogy in the Israeli Discourse”, *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel* 11 (2002), pp. 486-526 (Hebrew)

² B. Z. Kedar, “Il Motivo della Crociata nel Pensiero Politico Israeliano” in *Verso Gerusalemme. Il Convegno Internazionale nel IX Centenario della I Crociata (1099-1999)*, Bari, 11-13 gennaio 1999 (ed.) F. Cardim, M. Belloli, B. Vetere, Lecce 1999, pp. 135-150.

³ B. Kimmerling, *Zionism and Territory: The Socio-Territorial Dimension of Zionist Politics*, Berkeley: California University Press 1983; I. Pappé, *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1947-1949*, London: I.B. Tauris 1992.

⁴ *Al-Huriah*, 31.5.1967.

⁵ *Al-Hawdat*, 31.5.1967. I am indebted to Professor Moshe Shemesh, who drew my attention to this source.

⁶ Uriah Shavit, “Who Really Was Saladin?”, *Haaretz*, January 19, 2001 (Hebrew).

A brigade of the PLO army was called Hattin (site of a major Saladin victory); section 15 of the Hamas Charter praises Saladin; the 1973 Yom Kippur War was described as the first Arab victory since Saladin; the civil war in Lebanon was called the "Tenth Crusade," in which Lebanon's Maronite Christians were compared to the Franks; the "Peace for Galilee" War was said to be the "Twelfth Crusade," in which Beirut did duty as a Crusader feudal fiefdom, and in the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein proclaimed: "Salah ed-Din now loudly cries *Allah Akbar* (God is Great)!"⁷

From the day Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat returned from the failed Camp David peace talks with Israel in the summer of 2000, the Palestinian media never stopped praising him by comparing him to the legendary commander. From the beginning of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, Arafat continually declared in his speeches: "We shall return to Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa, entered by Salah ed-Din."

Emmanuel Sivan discerned three main schools of thought in the treatment of the Crusader phenomenon in Arab historiography. The first, prior to World War II, was concerned with the religious confrontation between Islam and Christianity and the Christian-Crusader threat to retake the territories conquered by Islam; the second, after World War II, saw the Crusades as the beginning of European imperialism; and the third saw the Crusades as an important phase in the ongoing confrontation between East and West in the Middle East from the 5th century B.C.E. onwards.⁸

The myth of Saladin has long been present in Arab history.⁹ Originally directed against European colonialism and Western civilization, in the last 60 years this mobilizing symbol has been utilized for the Arab-Israeli conflict and has been mainly directed against the "Zionist entity."¹⁰

It would not be surprising if in the Israeli-Crusader discourse, an effort has been made on the Israeli side to confront the mass of images and parallels associated with the Crusader myth.¹¹ It is interesting to note that there has been no such confrontation with the Zionist-Crusader analogy on the Arab side, and the debate on the validity of the historical comparison has not taken place there.

In his article "Zionist Studies of the Crusader Movement" (1992), Ziad Asali surveyed the works of the Israeli historians dealing with the Crusader phenomenon. He points out their relatively impressive representation in the international academic community: About 10% of the members of the Organization for Crusader Studies are Israeli scholars, and among 82 studies on the Crusaders published in 1980, 14 were written by Israelis.¹²

Asali concludes that "Zionism is the heir — albeit illegitimate — of the Crusader movement."¹³ According to Asali, it was born out of the depths of the Crusader residue in Western societies, as it combined dreams of reconquest of the Holy Land with a traditional antipathy towards Orientals, along with a solution for the Jewish problem in the West. The Jews effected a transposition, having been victims in the first crusade and aggressors in the modern one. Asali's article ends as follows: "The Israelis have studied the Crusader state in order to learn from its experience, avoid its mistakes and escape its fate."¹⁴

In his article "Crusaders and Zionists," which has a Zionist orientation, Meron Benvenisti writes: "Despite the academic weakness and bias of Arab historiographical scholarship with regard to the Crusaders, the analogy has also found support outside the Arab world."¹⁵

Years later, Benvenisti expressed a further opinion on the matter. In "Longings for the Crusaders," he suggested that the emphasis on the short Crusader period rather than the long period of Arab rule in Israel was intended to strengthen the Zionist claim that the history of the country was a long period of alien rule in which foreign rulers stole it from the Jews until the latter returned to the land and established Jewish sovereignty there.¹⁶ Stressing the Crusader period was a convenient way of blurring the fact that for 1,400 years an Arab-Muslim community lived here.

The Crusader epoch, which divides the Arab period into two, does not contradict the Zionist narrative. It is neutral in the Zionist-Palestinian dispute, for there is no fear that the Christians will exploit their contribution to the landscape to organize a new crusade for the liberation of the Holy Land. On the other hand, the Arab identity of important sites does interfere with the Zionist narrative. The reconstruction of Kokhav Ha-Yarden and Caesarea are

⁷ Offra Benjo, *Saddam's Iraq*. Tel Aviv: 1996 (Hebrew).

⁸ Emmanuel Sivan, *Arab Political Myths*, Tel Aviv: Am Oved 1988, pp. 20-25 (Hebrew).

⁹ Amin Maalouf, *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* (trans. Jon Rothschild). London: 1984.

¹⁰ Meron Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land Since 1948* (translated by Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta). Berkeley, CA: 2000, pp. 299-303.

¹¹ For example, see: Menahem Haran. "The Crusader Kingdom and the State of Israel", *Be-terem* (June 1949), pp. 55-59 (Hebrew).

¹² Ziad J. Asali, "Zionist Studies of the Crusader Movement," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 14 (1992), pp. 45-59.

¹³ Ibid, p. 57.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 58.

¹⁵ Meron Benvenisti, "Crusaders and Zionists," an article presented to the interdisciplinary seminar "Myth and History" which took place at the Van Leer Institute, Jerusalem, in 1989 (Hebrew).

¹⁶ Meron Benvenisti, "Longings for the Crusades," *Haaretz*, June 24, 1999 (Hebrew).

in Benvenisti's opinion examples of the expunging of a whole Arab civilization from the landscape, leaving Crusader remains which do not disturb a convenient historical narrative. In both these sites, the Arab structures were cleared away, and it was the Crusader structures that were restored and became tourist sites.

The archaeologist Adrian Boas replied to Benvenisti's charges. In his opinion, there has not been any international conspiracy of scholars to overlook the Muslim past.¹⁷ The preservation of mediaeval structures does not depend on their Crusader or Arab identity. For example, the Fortress of Belvoir is preserved, as opposed to the Arab village of Kaukab el-Hawa, but the Crusader past is not specially cultivated in the museums or in the archaeological circles of the universities in this country.

It would seem that when discussing the Crusader phenomenon, the academics repeatedly forget the rules of scholarly discipline. Professor Haim Gerber, for example, declares that the "new historians" who find "points of resemblance between the Zionist enterprise and the acts of the Crusaders" seek "to uproot the foundations on which the State of Israel rests, to question its legitimacy and in effect to contribute to its overthrow."¹⁸

Uri Avneri, answering Gerber, relates that already in the 1950s, "I was stunned by the similarity between the Crusades and the Zionist enterprise."¹⁹ Professor Ya'akov Amir expressed amazement at what Avneri had written: "By what jiggery-pokery does Avneri describe a supposed similarity between the Crusades and Zionism? Those who see a resemblance between the two are generally anti-Zionists who think that the fate of the Zionist movement will be like that of the Crusaders... The comparison of [Israel generals] Moshe Dayan or Arik Sharon to the Crusader leaders is absolute nonsense. It is worth recalling the Crusader knight who slaughtered 3,000 Muslims, including women and many children, in three days because he did not want to take hostages."²⁰

From the day Arafat returned after the breakdown of the Camp David talks, the Zionist-Crusader analogy was constantly on the Palestinian agenda. The outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada soon after deepened the trend.

Amos Oz, in the *New York Times*, put his finger on the salient point: The choice was between images and myths on the one hand and historical reconciliation on the other. Oz describes Arafat's return from the failed Camp

David summit as follows:

The whole Gaza Strip is covered with flags and slogans proclaiming the Palestinian Saladin. 'Welcome home, Saladin of our era!' is written on the walls.

In silence, astounded, I watch, and I can't help reminding myself that the original Saladin promised the Arab people that he would not make pacts with the infidels: he would massacre them and throw them in the ocean. I see Mr. Arafat dressed in his grey-green combat uniform. It's an Arafat clothed like Che Guevara and treated like Saladin: my heart breaks ... The Palestinians must choose if they want a new Saladin, or to really work for peace.²¹

The subject now serves as a litmus test to clarify attitudes towards Zionism. Those who sympathize with the Zionist point of view totally reject the Zionist-Crusader analogy, while the post-Zionists make the analogy. They have a "Christian" theory of original sin with regard to the Zionist movement and the State of Israel, reaching the conclusion that the sole solution to the problem is the negation of the State of Israel in its present form as a Jewish democratic state and its replacement by a "state of all its citizens."



Saladin and Richard

This "colonialist" discourse is not a new one. The analogy, however, has been disproved by the facts. The Zionist settlement of Palestine took place without military or political assistance from foreign states and does not resemble any colonialist movement. Zionism was not a religious movement but a national

¹⁷ Adrian Boas, "From the 15th of July 1099 to August 1291," *Haaretz*, August 1999 (Hebrew).

¹⁸ Haim Gerber, "The Guardians of the Walls," *Haaretz* Literary Supplement, 28.7. 1999 (Hebrew).

¹⁹ Uri Avneri, "On the Crusaders and the Zionists," *Haaretz* Literary Supplement, 11.8.1999 (Hebrew).

²⁰ Ya'akov Amir, "Crusaders and Zionists," *Haaretz* Literary Supplement, 1.9.1999 (Hebrew).

²¹ Amos Oz, "The Specter of Saladin," *The New York Times*, July 28, 2000.

movement that saw the return to Zion as the modern expression of a people wishing to forge its collective destiny through a return to its historical sources. The Israelis created a revitalized homeland and established an identity between a large part of the people and their soil; developed settlements, science, and technology; achieved a clear national identity with a culture, language, and creativity of its own; and succeeded in maintaining a democratic existence (within the “Green Line”) under the most trying conditions there can be for a democracy — a protracted military conflict. Most important of all, the Israelis never felt strangers in their country and did not apologize for their national existence; they saw it as the historical realization of a universal right supported by international recognition and not as an original sin.

At the dawn of the 21st century, the Zionist-Crusader analogy is still part of the new world-picture. The destruction of the World Trade Center in New York is a historic turning point in the struggle between “globalization” and “fundamentalism,” and has conjured up the specter of a crusade as symbolizing the demonization of the “other,” which in the name of a holy god authorizes his annihilation. The president of the United States, George W. Bush, declared that one had to wage a crusade against the fundamentalists, and Osama Bin Laden called for a *jihad* against the “Crusader-Jewish alliance,” in this way binding up the motivations for world terror with the “Crusader” guilt for the State of Israel.

Do the Al-Aqsa Intifada and the electoral victory of Hamas represent a turning point in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where a national conflict becomes a national-religious conflict? The new radical religious symbolism reaches its climax in the Zionist-Crusader analogy, which is rapidly becoming a myth and a counter-myth among the Israelis and Palestinians.

The ways in which the Crusader narrative is presented embody the opposing intentions of the opposing sides. The Arab side has nurtured a myth in which a historical analogy has been bound up with political attitudes and religious sermonizing. Most of those representing the Israeli side have sought to divest this politico-religious myth of its content by using a dry secular terminology, although many of them have nurtured a counter-myth which has given rise to an enlisted political narrative.

This was well expressed by the Israeli thinker Emil Fackenheim, who at the height of the Al-Aqsa Intifada voiced the opinion of most Israelis: “The Crusaders came to Jerusalem but we returned to it. They abandoned it, but we came in order to stay. And while they left behind them ruins in the sand, we came in order to build it anew.”²²

The Crusades have become a mythical Rashomon narrative, in which each group has created its own version.

²² Emil Fackenheim, “With, or Without God’s Help,” *Haaretz*, December 27, 2000 (Hebrew).